



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Why was the manna 'a test'?

In the Book of Deuteronomy Moses urges his people to gird themselves with spiritual and moral strength to be worthy to enter the promised land. This week we take up the story with Deut. 8:1-6, with particular focus on the reference to the miracle of the manna:

"The LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart... He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone..." (Deut. 8:2-3).

Here, and also in Exodus 16:4, the manna is described as a 'test'. The sages puzzled over this. Surely a test implies undertaking something difficult. Yet the manna was God's miraculous gift of food, sustaining the Israelites when they hungered in the wilderness. Why call it a 'test'? After reading Deut. 8:1-6, and revisiting chapter 16 of Exodus, enter into the sages' discussion.

Whatever theories may arise about natural causes of the manna, theologically-speaking the sages view it as divine gift. Unlike

a short-lived miracle, this 'bread of angels' (Ps. 78:25) lasted forty years and continued to amaze people long afterwards. According to Sforno (15-16th c.), because the manna provided such comfort, the 'test' was to see whether the Israelites would be attentive to God even when not in a state of suffering. Are you convinced by this interpretation? Not all the rabbis are!

Sforno's view can be questioned on the grounds that the manna was hardly a luxury. It was a strange, unpopular food, 'unknown to their ancestors'. Perhaps you prefer Nahmanides' (13th c.) explanation:

"They were totally dependent on the daily portion of manna which rained down and melted in the heat of the sun."

Although miraculous and sustaining, the manna came in limited measures and could not be stored. Its collection and digestion represented an act of trust: that there would be enough for today, and that the Lord would provide enough for tomorrow. Day by day, for forty years, the manna taught the Israelites dependence on their Maker for their most basic of needs.

In this light we can make sense of the view of Rashi (11th c.): the real test of the manna lay in the instructions that accompanied it. Would the Israelites obey these instructions, not attempting to

store it, not gathering on the Sabbath? In other words, would Israel demonstrate by concrete action its trust in the Lord, its willingness to follow the Torah? The manna was a gift, but not always appreciated (recall the complaint in Numbers 11:6: 'there is nothing at all but this manna to look at'). Reflect: Even in the face of God's miracles, there is the temptation of negativity and ingratitude. What is my own response?

Further reflection

The story of the manna is also found in Psalm 78:24-25 ('he rained down on them manna to eat...the bread of angels'), Psalm 105:40 ('food from heaven') and Nehemiah 9:15.

In John's Gospel (6:31), following the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus and his disciples refer to the manna. Think about how your reading of this gospel passage is enriched by having reflected with the Jewish sages on the miracle of the manna.

Bibliography: Beale and Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2007); Heschel, *Heavenly Torah* (NY, 2007); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda); *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 2001). Scripture: NRSV.